



## Directorate for Research, Lifelong learning and Innovation

### Adult Education and Disability: eliminating the fear of the unknown

Adult Education and Disability was one of the subjects discussed during the fifth meeting of the Thematic Working Group organised by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Innovation on 17 May, as part of the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2017.

The main speaker was Rhoda Garland who is the Executive Director for the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD). She briefly mentioned the history of education for disabled people in Malta, which she divides into two groups: pre- and post-1985, when Malta signed the UN convention on the rights of persons with disability. Before 1985, education was segregated and no need was felt to educate disabled children. The result was disabled adults with a lack of necessary skills, and low self-esteem and confidence.

She noted that while there have been huge advancements in the past 30 years, further steps need to be taken: "What we have now is disabled children being taught with non-disabled children but not necessarily in an inclusive way. The issue now is that disabled adults do not have the necessary skills for the job market. There is a real need for disabled adults to advance in adult education. From the research carried out on young disabled people in transition, it resulted that they had no confidence in getting a job, qualified or not," explained Ms Garland, noting however, that employment of disabled people is on the increase.

She outlined two types of education in Malta – mainstream and specific. CRPD courses like the [Pathway to Independent Living Programme](#) at MCAST are excellent for intellectually disabled people to get life skills as they are tailor-made for their needs. Ms Garland emphasised that even extremely impaired people can benefit from such programmes with adequate support provided.

Ms Garland was intent on highlighting another issue that needs to be addressed, this time regarding legal rights. Maltese legislation provides disabled people with lots of rights, however, despite offering inclusive education, there are still schools that do not accept children with autism. Even though Malta was one of the first to sign the UN convention, there are still disability rights issues, which after all, are human rights. One's human rights mean nothing if one constantly comes up against the same issue again and again. The rights for education and work are fundamental but are not being met.

All the laws are in place, so what's wrong? Ms Garland blames the problem on fear. Disabled people are perceived as semi-tragic people who have to be protected or are a charity issue and depend on donated money. So they instill fear when they make it to the work or education environment.

"There is a real fear of the unknown," she noted. "There is fear about what will happen when disabled persons are included in the work environment, that they will cause disruption. There is lack

of knowledge about disability, but there is also the lack of desire to learn about it. Employers are terrified when a disabled person walks in," she explained.

Speaking about the way forward, she said: "Institutions themselves should look at our rights and provide support, whether it is through an assistant or some form of technology. For years we have been talking to higher education institutes like University and MCAST to make some adjustments in order to accommodate disabled students. One needs to look at solutions in order for disabled people to learn.

Ms Garland suggested what needs to be done to change the current situation:

"There needs to be a change in culture. When I came to Malta 11 years ago, I was shocked at how few disabled people I saw in the street. We want to live independently like everyone else, sometimes with some support."

She also mentioned the lack of accessibility, be it physical or informational, as well as lack of flexibility.

Ms Garland explained further: "There is also lack of informational accessibility, such as websites which can be made accessible with very basic programming techniques." While the issue may seem small, it can have bigger repercussions: "Disabled students will think - if you don't get a website right, how can you provide for my needs in education? And they will move on to the next possible institution which might cater for their needs," said the Executive Director.

Ms Garland believes flexibility is the key to the way courses are taught or presented, especially since different impairments require different support. This, she pointed out, is something which can only be tackled by adapting the 'universal design teaching approach', especially if you have a number of disabled students with different needs in class. This method uses multiple means of engagement, representation and expression. Lecturers should also be flexible with assignments or exams by adopting the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines which provide teachers with [methods and resources](#) to create flexible lesson plans.

Ms Garland concluded by noting how these accessible techniques should be taught to student teachers at university-level.



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